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Turning the ordinary into the exceptional: digital storytelling and the works of Daniel Meadows.

Abstract

Creative works are no longer to be intended as a given *product*, but as an ongoing 'emergent' *process* at the intersection between porous media boundaries. The exceptionality of the work of art is questioned by highlighting the interstitial, processual and translational dimension of any cultural production aiming at being recognised as *aesthetic*.

Narratives — novels or hypertexts, art exhibitions or cultural events, video games or political campaigns, travelogues or company profiles — spread over multiple platforms and media, calling for a renewed interest in the ancient art of storytelling. In the new participative transmedia environment, storytelling travels across all sorts of cultural fields thanks to the re-creative and re-distributive processes allowed by the Internet and social media sharing. The medium enhances the practice: storytelling combines oral narrative (mode) in the form of a script (genre) but uses a variety of media (blog, web page, social networks) to create meaning. Emotive language is also important.

These discursive aspects involved in storytelling will be illustrated by examining by the work of Daniel Meadows (born 1952), an English photographer and participatory media specialist who pioneered digital storytelling techniques in Britain.

Meadows' work was influenced by Ivan Illich's ideas as presented in *Tools for Conviviality* (1975) and the activity of the Center for Digital Storytelling at the University of California, Berkeley. In this perspective, he has produced fictional short video/photo narratives that focus on the participants' creativity, dramatising cultures, traditions and life-stories. Meadows questions the role of the Author and his/her uniqueness by foregrounding the ordinary as a source of aesthetic value. The stories claim their exceptionality by embracing a sort of 'anarchist' view of society where individualism is the most vital source of aesthetics. Digital stories place fragments of life on a broader world context and re-enact the point of view on History of the subjects involved. The paper suggests that visual culture, Heritage and narration are an area of mediation that turns the ordinary into the exceptional.

The Roots

> We publish these stories in all good faith but […]
> it's sometimes difficult to tell where the border between fact and fiction lies. (Capture Wales, website)

Since the 1970s, we have witnessed the emergence of an interest in the analysis of non-literary forms of narrative, from conversational stories to narratives of personal experience (Labov 1972). Disciplines such as anthropology, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and pragmatics drew attention to stories as a form of social interaction, focusing on their contexts, often in political terms, and foregrounding their significance in terms of interpersonal and identity building in groups of speakers.

Hyvärinen (2008) described how in social research storytelling has been seen as a tool to investigate phenomena that relate individuals to communities, broadening the scope of narratology. In his reconstruction of the development of storytelling research methodology, he highlighted how William Labov and Joshua Waletsky (1997 [1967]) developed a model to identify narrative in its structural components and isolate it from other forms of expression such as description, argument or debate by using linguistic tools. However, the model appeared focused on the sequencing/ timing of narration, and no attention was paid to the context in which a narrative can be. In other words, the model portrayed stories as independent and fully formed texts. In this perspective, nothing is told about the audience, and that the model does not consider essential pragmatic features such as fillers, silence, and hesitation. In this perspective, a narrative is a cognitively and discursively complex genre that incorporates many elements of description, evaluation and explanation, and oral storytelling adds elements such as question, clarification, challenge and speculation that make it even more complex (Ochs and Capps 2001, 18–19). Therefore, narrative constituents realise a process and are not a self-contained genre. Moreover, Gubrium and Holstein highlight the relevance of context in defining narrative dynamics and recognize two layers of control: the interactional and the institutional (2007, 30–41) that comprise a pragmatic oriented understanding of narration and one based on critical discourse analysis. In fact, narration is based on the processing of many cultural scripts which are a montage of formulaic narratives that work on the opposition between what is known (the familiar) and what is alien (unfamiliar) foregrounding the "discordance" of life (Ricoeur 1984).

For the most part, sustained study of face-to-face narratives has remained in a parallel but separate domain from the literary-theoretical study of storytelling (Page, Brownen, 2011). In recent

years the development of online discourse opened up a whole new area of investigation that has had to come to terms with the confines of traditional narratology and at the same time avoid overgeneralising descriptions (Chihaia, Rennhak, 2019).

Digital narratology integrates narrative and new media approaches and examines texts and practices that broaden the medial, generic and modal range of data that might be considered story-like. A definition of genre is often problematic given the constant technical improvements of the media with their limitations in terms of readability, space and layout of a text, the mandatory role of visual communication within a text, the preference of the public for diverse environments in which to collocate themselves. Moreover, online communication highlights the fundamental importance of context so that even digital narratology is now sensitive towards the political corollaries of narration, and indeed of the narrative theory itself. The apparent impartiality of the online narrative system of the beginnings has been replaced by a renovated focus on the ethics of being associated with the narrative act. It should also be highlighted that storytelling has become a powerful tool also in company communication and at the same time is now regarded as a valuable therapeutic strategy. Furthermore, it is a way to create identity especially among neglected minority groups (Hayes, Edlmann and Brown, 2019).

Contemporary narratology has also moved beyond formalism to explore issues of gatekeeping and access to online communication. In all cases, readers and audiences are viewed not as passive recipients of semantic contents but rather as participants in the co-production of the text's meanings. Yet there are minor differences in in the approach to storytelling whether by media specialists or narratologists: media theorists prefer to talk of transmedia storytelling (Price, Hogden, 2019: 205-215) while in narratology the term transmedial is preferred both to highlight a concern with the materiality of different media, and to acknowledge the influence of semiotic theory (Ryan, McLoughlin, Keating 2006). Likewise, in new media theory, the terms cross-media texts or cross-media platforms describe what narratology labelled distributed narrative (Walker 2004).

In practice, this types of texts question coherence as often there is no strict chronological order rather segmentation, i.e. the juxtaposition of sentences that define the narrative time with the delivering or performance of the story itself. In fact, print narratives might contain extraordinarily intricate temporal patterning and sophisticated configurations of possible worlds. Digital fictions need not. A new spectrum of plot typologies characterised by deferred endings or the possibility of multiple endings is an example of how the limits of temporality and space may be questioned. Hitherto, the impact of digital textuality on narrative theory has concentrated on structural concerns,

but narratives are not just sequences of events: those events are told by and about particular individuals. As the study of digital texts increasingly includes narrative practices, it is all the more pressing to reconsider how the relationship between narrative and self-representation might be reworked in the context of online environments. It has always been acknowledged that storytelling, whether claimed to be fictional or not, is a selective and partial method of representation as Narrative analysis is not a transparent measure of identity but forms an experiential act allowing readers to understand how the self comes into being (Bamberg 1997; Meister, Kindt, Schernus 2009).

Expectations about the developments of online representation also address the issue of authenticity, i.e. the relationship between narrative, self-representation, and finally fictionality. On the one hand, the Internet allows for multiple identity play (by adopting false and/or gender-neutral pseudonyms, avatars etc.). On the other, the relationship between identity in online and offline contexts reminds of the fact that readers and writers are not functions but people and that producing or processing narratives in digital media is a real experience.

Behind the story

Digital Storytelling arose in America in the 1990s as a mode of telling personal, often emotional, stories using multimedia tools, both with therapeutic intentions and as part of building a national identity, i.e. with documentary intentions primarily directed to ethnic or linguistic minorities.

Recording ‘oral history’ is generally seen as a precursor for this type of exploration of the ‘ordinary’, and is defined as ‘spoken history’ (Perks, 1995: 5; 32). Through voicing the stories of those previously marginalized groups, a more accurate representation of history emerges, one that is legitimised by those ‘ordinary’ people: The Oral History Society, created in 1973 attested to a growing interest in recording in depth interviews with ‘ordinary’ people as faithful witness of the time they lived in. The Society advocates the use of Oral History recording in “Local and family history, schools by young people to explore their own community, in community and residential work with older people, in museums, galleries and heritage displays, at local archives and libraries

and as an essential source for radio and television programmes"[1]. The creation of the National Sound Archive pointed in the same direction through with a broader intent.

The material constitutes an archive can be built on a range of topics it rescues the individual from the crowd and redresses a balance which has tended to give greater credence to the powerful (Perks, 1995: 5). The novelty lies in the meaning associated with the stories which are creating connections. These tools and many others are helping or perhaps even forcing writers and artists to think outside the realm of traditional linear narrative. Every aspect of storytelling, structure, plot, character, pace, voice, timing, and setting has the potential to be morphed by digital contact. Morphing refers to the process of change and progressive transformation of the structure of an image so that the shape is restructured and reorganized in a different form. The technique highlights the materiality of a digital picture but it also introduces the time dimension as a sort of animation i. Time is seen as a form of sequence that supports the narrative by adjusting different levels (focus). More specifically, it foregrounds the *intermediate*. In this framework, pictures comment on words as words are not mere footage.

Digital stories as forms of Heritage were conceived well before the advent of the web. Digital storytelling developed from the idea of a democratised culture rooted in the activist movements of the 60s. It began as an art literacy project resting on the belief that the artist is a 'curator', i.e. someone who leaves in the hands of the audience the creative task of making art meaningful. The artistic process was flipped to subvert traditional notions of authorship. The movement played an important role in community media arts by taking advantage of technologies.

During the 70s and 80s, arts practitioners and educators across disciplines challenged the notion that art and culture should be reserved for the gifted or the professionals. Artists acknowledged that ordinary people could give their creative contributions to national identity. The Arts had to be made accessible to all, especially those traditionally left behind in an age of social and political conflict, among small groups of contributors, especially those at risk of exclusion. It conceptualised 'popular' culture as a national Heritage and standardised a format that was later adapted to new media (Samuel, 1994; Silberman and Purser, 2012).

Digital stories are short (3–5 min) autobiographical multimedia narratives in video format, combining personal photographs and narration. The participants themselves voice the story, and sometimes music is added (Lambert, 2002). Storytelling, combined with its digital frame aims at encouraging social interaction. The digital aims at its maximum access, hence there is a double

[1] https://www.ohs.org.uk/

level of the interface: contributors are not just originating their material, but they are editing it too, which means that they are not 'told' or 'done' by the medium. They keep their agency and ownership over the (online) self-representations by personally selecting, curating and arranging their pictures in multimedia format (Marlar, 2010).

The 'offline' plotting and scripting of the story and the 'online' life of personal images as stories, collect the emotive experience of staging memories as a social event. Participants tell stories as opposed to History and, for this reason, they look (photograph) and sound (story as told) authentic. Authenticity engages the public.

The narration provides cohesion to a set of selected memories that are subject to a process of decontextualization (fragment extraction) to be recontextualised (story assemblage). Images are embedded in a linear sequence and locked into a unique, 'singular' form of self-representation. Pictures complete the written story by making meaning more explicit or suggesting a further level of signification and creating layers of implicatures, esp. metaphors, at times, irony (Pier, 2004)[2].

The verbal framing explains feelings, concerns, details of social life as evident, inevitable, cathartic: this makes them what Barthes defined *biographemes* (Barthes, 1980; Dant and Gilloch, 2002; O'Meara Kitchens, 2015).

Nonetheless, the author, the characters and even the end-viewers play intersecting roles in the storytelling system. Storytelling is a foregrounding process performed by multiple actants: the author exposes his project and its mechanism, while the teller is (apparently) empowered and free to act on the story. Author and the character/ subject share the same aims. When circulated on social media, the viewer can also play a role in the process.

Digital Stories can generally be categorized into three major areas:

- Private stories
- Stories that instruct in ethical terms
- Re-telling of historical events with a personal outlook

What are the elements of a digital story? Lambert identifies some key features (2003):

- Point of view
- Dramatic question

[2] http://digistories.co.uk/digistories-2/how-is-a-digital-story-made/.

- Emotional content
- The gift of your voice
- The power of the soundtrack
- Economy
- Ellipsis

Ellipses, in particular, it indicates what is not there, in other words, the exceptional, what makes memory stand out, often using objects.[3]

Meadows in Wales: turning the ordinary into the exceptional

Daniel Meadows introduced storytelling with the support of the BBC to connect more closely with communities, create new contents, increase digital literacy and build an archive of the 'real' Wales. Capture Wales is an example of the culture industry the BBC involving the audience in the production and distribution of their information and entertainment. It represented a new use of technology. The project took place within BBC Wales, and there was a range of stakeholders in the project who valued the effort and the task of developing something Welsh. For the members of the team that ran the project, it provided an opportunity for people to represent themselves truthfully, as opposed to being inadequately represented by media professionals. This view determined what was done during the workshops and the production of the videos.

On the other hand, for the senior management in the BBC, Capture Wales was an occasion to build a positive response in public, and even a sense of belonging to the institution as members of the public something that reinforced the legitimacy of this institution. These views of the role of Capture Wales determined the funding and internal support that the project received even if the placement of self-representation in broadcast remained uncertain. The project was brought to a halt in. The BBC and its team framed the digital stories to provide both the technical support and the legitimacy thus mediating the stories. On the other hand, participants were aware of their role beyond expectations. Participants' conception of themselves as both 'ordinary' and, at the same

[3] See for example https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-_FI3YLF26Y

time, unique, developed into self-representations that questioned the idea of 'ordinary people' a euphemism for working-class (Skeggs, 2009).

The Capture Wales project also has an interactive web presence. On the site[4], users can watch stories, find out how to make them, learn about the history of the project, read workshop participants views, comment on the stories and contact the team at the BBC. Ian Hargreaves' proposal for the project entitled *Welsh Lives* in January 2001 outlined the perceived benefits of a Digital Storytelling project for BBC Wales, creating fresh output for BBC Wales Digital TV and Internet, making an original and sustainable contribution to community self-expression, connecting with communities (not in a corporate manner but through a project which depends on those communities), opening up new lines of talent in journalism, script-writing and visual skills, and also high profile and strong marketing themes (Hargreaves, 2001). Hargreaves also highlighted the following benefits for Wales; access and teaching for Welsh people to the latest multimedia technology whilst creating sustainable bases for further deployment of a technology vital to the future, a boost to the Welsh creative economy, asserting identity and escaping the confines of mass media images of celebrity and raising community self-esteem (Hargreaves, 2001)

Discussion

Why do people want to tell their stories? Website information on participants documents their desire to tell their particular stories. Although individually articulated, there are threads that run through this reasoning such as they wish to tell a story now, that the timing is right and may never be again. This is often linked to the desire to impart knowledge to others - that their story can help others in a similar situation to come to rational and rewarding decisions about their future. Self-representations conform to the first-person experiential voice-over that is a defining feature of the digital storytelling form. And yet, there is no certainty that what we are hearing is in fact, truth. Here the self-representation form is one that explicitly allows that 'truth' is subjective and yet, paradoxically, the idea of self-representation promises a more truthful representation both for the person representing and for her audience. In Capture Wales the very thing that was under construction, the 'ordinary person', was undermined as a possibility even as it was constructed, in this way highlighting the tension which accompanies any ascription of 'ordinary person there is a

[4] www.bbc.co.uk/wales/capturewales

recognisable genre – 'ordinary people' speaking about family life and at the same time making clear that the construction of the 'ordinary person' cannot hold and is not what is interesting about people. The whole digital story is two minutes long and sits on the website alongside many other individual self-representations, each of which destabilises the concept of the 'ordinary person'. At the same time, the collection of these stories highlights commonalities (as well as differences) between members of the public and thus, in each digital story, as well as in their collection and display on this website, the notion of the 'ordinary person' is reconstructed. This example from the Capture Wales website suggests that the processes of textual mediation at work here consisted of interaction between producer and participant, rather than, for example, a producer representation and a participant resistance. These digital stories are of a uniform length (between two and three minutes). They all use first-person voice-over and storytellers are encouraged to tell stories from a personal perspective or about a personal experience. They mostly use still photographs and sometimes a tiny amount of video. While these digital stories are all made by different individuals, they share characteristics that make them recognisable and carefully constructed.

Meadows described them as 'multimedia sonnets from the people'. The voice-over is written in workshops that begin with discussions, games and a 'storytelling circle' and conclude with help with editing from expert tutors and finally, the recording of the voice-over with an expert sound recordist assisting. The way that sound is used typically works to unite the stories supporting a poetic aesthetic. These stories generally use family photographs, 'family archives', sometimes people's own drawing or artworks, and sometimes some video as well. Meadows uses the term 'scrapbook aesthetic' to describe the look of these stories, which are self-representations purposefully and clearly marked as constructed from the family albums of 'ordinary people', but carefully crafted, digitally reproduced and lingered over – suggesting a valuing of the memories on offer. The BBC claim to quality is signalled in the macro-texts of the websites and TV programmes by which the self-representations are framed. Here, quality is about the authority of the institution, and this is indicated by a distinct, 'tasteful' institutional look to the website by the use of professional equipment and expertise for the individual stories (sound, writing, photography). This ideal quality in the production process is intended to lead to a quality outcome for the wider audience, as well as to provide satisfaction to those who participated even if the result may not correspond to the initial intent. In fact, participants in Capture Wales claimed their ordinariness and in so doing expanded the definition of that idea. And yet, as discussed above, the framing and the grouping of so many self-representations by members of the public do function to construct the 'ordinary person' in a way that contains and limits what it can mean. However, this is not a stable and unchanging definition, but one that comes undone and must be continually remade. Dominant

ideas about ‘new media’ inform audience members’ views of technology, institutions and even human communication and development more generally. Yet, while digital technology is understood to be important, its value is unclear and shifting (Thumin, 2012). Some participants emphasised skills development, and others focused on audiences for the self-representations who, thanks to technology, can be reached across distances of space or time; the ability to imagine a future audience rests on the (familiar) assumption that digital technology promises that these self-representations will be ‘there forever’. The key issue is thus the construction of an idea of community – individual self-representations are made in groups and emerge from the interactions between individuals. Indeed, group interaction in the workshops is described by those involved in digital storytelling projects in general as ‘community building’ and regarded as a vital aspect of the digital storytelling form by its creators as well as by participants (Lambert, 2006). In these projects, individuals represent themselves and those self-representations are located in/come out of what the project producers/policymakers/cultural commentators describe as ‘communities’. Nevertheless, uniform communities do not exist, but rather people who understand themselves as members of distinct communities and, indeed, the notion of community is predicated on the exclusion of some (Bauman, 2003).

Photography, along with drama, played a significant role in the community projects that were so common in the late 70s. and continue to be used as means of cultural integration (Coffman, 2019) Cameras documented the projects and were offered to the public as a specimen of creative tools that could be used autonomously and promoted visual literacy to show how ‘locality’ could be made meaningful. In the last decades, new technical opportunities have expanded digital literacy involving large audiences. From print to digital, the ‘technologization of orality’ provides an extraordinary way of fixing memory over time. At the same time, the architecture of networked digital technologies reinforces the public exposure of the self. In this context, storytelling has increased its popularity being a genre that foregrounds the creative process itself. Storytelling focuses on individuals and exploits visual technologies but retains the centrality of narration, hence of the text. The web encourages interactive knowledge production: many of these newer creations involve remixes, mash-ups, and other types of appropriation of digital content (Jenkins, Ford, Green, 2013).

Collaborative, decentralised and participatory methods of authorship are core components of all forms of contemporary media which point at substituting the authorial function with a peer-produced, non-profit framework that enhances creativity (Lee and Wellman, 2012). Storytelling fits into this perspective because of the way participants interact and remediate fragments of life

experience as unique. The result, though, is anything but spontaneous as I observed in the example discussed above (Ochs and Capps, 2001).

Meadows' photographs are not simple snapshots of reality but clusters of meaning. Rather than just freezing a moment, they let the viewer grasp and understand the whole lives of the subjects portrayed. The fact that a text is added 'augments' this aspect and creates the diegetic quality of the photograph: an equivalent level of narration that highlights a 'punctum' as I discussed above. Moreover, anticipating post-modern culture, he redefines the object of his photographs by shifting their aesthetic value from the 'beautiful and the sublime' towards the standard, meaningless details that comprise everyday life. His representations are open to new contextualizations by the use of the digital medium. In fact, Meadows is exemplary in revitalising the past with technology. He idealises Englishness by foregrounding affection, valuing authenticity, presenting language and working-class 'eccentricity' as actual instances of nationhood. His documentary photography is indeed a theoretical construct with an established tradition in English culture.

[…] nobody can be dismissed as 'ordinary'. Everyone is, to seem to small degree at least, extraordinary […] I hope that everyone who read the stories will be able to enjoy a snatch of life as it is lived by someone else. For it is only by appreciating each other's circumstances that we can hope to improve our world. (Meadows, 1975: 125)

Yet, what Meadows collected in his early career anticipated the mediated managing of individual, social and cultural identities that were to come in the 21st Century, where digital devices assemble fragments that build new 'living archives' of people and stories (Peters, Allan, 2016). Memory is kept alive as a digital item, as a framework in which visual culture and oral testimony merge and create ever-changing forms of Heritage communication (Guy, 2016).

Creative works are no longer to be intended as a given *product*, but as an ongoing 'emergent' *process* at the intersection between porous media boundaries. The exceptionality of the work of art is questioned by highlighting the interstitial, processual and translational dimension of any cultural production aiming at being recognised as *aesthetic*.

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